

The Marketing of Philosophy

A Preliminary Report

Peter G. Jones

There is much talk in the profession these days of finding ways to improve the marketing of philosophy as an academic discipline. The department is under attack from many sides for its inability to reach a conclusion on any important philosophical question and some prominent critics publicly doubt the value of studying it. In the US at least the teaching of philosophy is coming to be seen as inessential to a credible university curriculum and departments are closing.

A commercial enterprise finding itself in this position would initiate a marketing review as a matter of urgency, probably bringing in external consultants armed with a fresh eye and no stake in maintaining the status quo. If the contract came my way I would make the following informal observations.

Marketing is often confused with selling but would normally refer to a far broader range of activity. Some confusion on this point afflicts many suggested approaches to promoting philosophy as an academic discipline. Rarely are they more than proposals for selling the current product by dumbing it down, repackaging it, making it cheaper or increasing the advertising budget. This is disrespectful to the customer. It is being assumed that the customer is at fault for not seeing what a wonderful product the company is selling. It is also poor commercial practice.

Marketing in a full sense would begin with the design of the product and not the selling of it. If the product is poor then it will require much effort, a large budget and considerable copywriting sophistry to sell it. If it is a great product then it should be easy and cheap to sell and customers will keep coming back. Sometimes it is not easy to change a product when it loses its appeal and this may leave a manufacturer with little choice but to continue to sell it at any cost until it goes under. Few companies have total inertia, however, and philosophy is not one of them. A company with a marketing focus will be continually re-designing its products and services in order to minimise the cost of selling them.

Is university philosophy a great product? Clearly not, given the widely acknowledged difficulty of selling it and the current interest in finding new and more effective ways of doing so. The question immediately arises of whether the product has to be this way, such that it must be sold at any cost, or whether

it can improved. Is the whole industry facing the same problem, or is it just that a particular brand or model of philosophy is difficult to sell?

This latter idea is rarely considered in the Academy. It is rarely considered because the only successful alternative to the current university product belongs to its main competitor so must be shunned and its good features denied. As a consequence it is poorly known and there is often a failure even to see that it is a competing product. A corporate culture almost exclusively focussed on selling the traditional product has limited the company's vision and acts as a major obstacle to the creation and implementation of a well-thought out marketing plan, one for which product design would be at the core and not promotion and selling.

A marketing plan would normally start with the needs and wants of existing and potential customers. What do they want? They want to know how the world works, whether life has any purpose or meaning, what happens to them when they die, whether they have freewill, whether God exists, whether space and time are real, whether Materialism is true, how to interpret quantum mechanics, whether it matters how they behave and if so how they should, how to be happy, how to make sense of their own consciousness and many other such things. Does the current product meet their wants and needs? It does not. So how can it be sold effectively? Only by arguing that although the company's product cannot provide these benefits it is better than nothing. This requires maintaining the pretence that there is no alternative product. It requires that the customer be misled and it ensures that the product never improves.

Must the company come increasingly under threat of cut-backs and closures or can the situation be turned around? If it can be turned around then it could only be by making the product more attractive, and this will only become possible if the organisational culture of the company is re-oriented away from promotion and selling towards a process of constant product-improvement on behalf of its customers. The academic study of philosophy brings well-known benefits regardless of its success as long as it is serious, but are these benefits incidental or are they what prospective customers really want? Are they enough to generate healthy sales forecasts and attract investment and grants? What most potential customers want from philosophy is answers, conclusions, results, tangible and quantifiable benefits that would include a better understanding of themselves and their world. The product currently on offer is not what customers want but what they may believe, because they have been told, would be better than nothing.

A vital ingredient for a marketing review would be a close examination of the products of competitors. For the modern Academy its main competitor and perhaps only serious one would be the school of practice and thought known as the Perennial Philosophy. Knowing ones enemy would be vital for a good marketing operation, yet at this time it appears that little is known about this competitor inside the company. If there is an alternative to its own product in the same market then a commercial company would usually know it as well as their own, and for anyone involved with marketing this would be a matter of professional competence.

What does the competitor product offer? What would the Philosophy of the Upanishads, the Buddha and Lao Tsu be able to claim in its marketing brochure that the Academy cannot claim for its own product? That it offers answers to questions and solutions to problems. That it has a strong and global customer base, a myriad of ecstatic customers and thirty centuries of positive customer feedback including endorsements from countless well-known celebrities. That it has proven reliability, is remarkably cheap and offers something for everyone from the dabbler to the professional expert and committed practitioner. Unlike the traditional 'western' or northern European product - which accompanies and supports a religious worldview rejected by its competitor for having become naïve and misleading - it is a product only very occasionally criticised by physicists, who rarely know anything about it, and that is quite often endorsed by them where it is studied.

It offers an interpretation of quantum mechanics, an explanation for consciousness, a way of avoiding philosophical 'hard' problems and thus solving metaphysics, a 'hands-on' method for increasing happiness in life and reducing fear of death, an ethical scheme that is forgiving, clearly-defined and practical at all times and a description of Reality that reaches beyond time and space and enshrines Love and Compassion as Cosmic principles. It offers a vast multi-lingual literature characterised by its rigour, elegance, beauty, simplicity, helpfulness, reliability, humour and honest motivation.

Such a competitor might seem a dangerous threat yet at the same time represents a clear opportunity. It has captured a large market share and its student numbers continue to rise. To compete for these students all the company would need to do would be to jump on the bandwagon and copy, steal or improve on its competitor's product. The work of establishing a market has been done, the entire theoretical edifice is already in place and the blueprints for the product are all in the public domain.

A consultant in this situation would be bound to advise the company to examine this competitor product in great detail. A formal analysis of threats, weakness, opportunities and threats can be expected to indicate that the main priority for the marketing department should be product research. Market research would be unnecessary since enough is known about what customers want. They want the same as we all want. The research focus would be on backwards-engineering the competitor product in order to steal its best features and cash in on its appealing brand-image and global market. This research would later inform product design and eventually, once the bugs are ironed out, promotion and selling of a new or improved product, this last step now made cheap and simple by a product that meets customer needs.

If the company's in-house research into this competing product leads to the creation of a set of corporately-approved texts, interpretations, commentaries and other introductory teaching materials that can be trusted *within the company* as authoritative and is capable of being comprehended by a strictly 'scholastic' philosophy student at undergraduate level then this may be a highly profitable product that could be offered by most philosophy departments. As a quite different product from the traditional fare it would attract attention, and it might even be popular with many of the competitor's existing customers as a way of studying the theory behind the practice.

The marketing brochure might look too good to be true. Many people young and old will want to come to university to learn about this description of the world, how it would connect-up with physics, consciousness studies, psychology, theology and other areas of knowledge, what it would mean for their daily lives, how it would explain origins, freewill, matter and so forth, what it predicts will happen when we die and what may have happened to our deceased loved ones, what makes this philosophy unfalsifiable such that it can safely be called 'perennial' not only for its ancient origins but as a hostage to fortune. There might be queues around the block. This world-view is easy to sell for its mysteriousness and weirdness, for its magical and seemingly endless literature, for its claim that life and death are of cosmic significance while also being a misunderstanding, for its air of peace and tranquillity, for its opposition to the status quo, for its immediate connection with hearts and minds, for its claim that within each of us the universe is enfolded. Whatever else it is this philosophy is not boring, unengaging or unchallenging. Whether it is true would be another matter but students should reach their finals able to make a well-informed guess. And then, the cherry on the cake, the practices that would normally accompany a theoretical study of this philosophy are reported to be

assisted in the early stages by the ingestion of mind-altering substances. There seems to be no downside, a perfect product for a healthy student market.

At under-graduate level a purely 'scholastic' approach to teaching the perennial philosophy would be practical if it remains almost entirely theoretical. Later development might extend courses into post-graduate studies but there would be limits to the level at which a university can offer such a product without having rather unusual staff. At post-graduate level one would expect students to be doing practical work, probably guided by an expert teacher off-campus, as well as their academic studies and research. If an undergraduate course covers the theory properly then any subsequent courses would have to be more practical in order to be worth taking.

Driven by a marketing focus there would be an ongoing process of improving the explanation of the Perennial Philosophy taught to undergraduates and this could provide a focus for post-graduate research. Hesse's evolutionary 'Glass Bead Game' might provide a model for this communal enterprise. At present there is much confusion and nothing like a consensus on how to translate the teachings of even one authentic Master or Sage into the language used by the Academy, and yet it has all the skills and resources that would be required to change this situation and the motivation of growing criticism, falling sales and professional redundancies.

University philosophy has no marketing department or ability to act in a directed way so a list of marketing recommendations would be useless to it. There will already be as many opinions on this report as there are readers of it. One practical and probably uncontentious approach, and perhaps as much as would be necessary in the long-term, would be the establishment of a grant-awarding body charged with encouraging and promoting the study of the philosophy of the Upanishads and its equivalents with a strong emphasis on the clarification and reliable communication of this doctrine within an academic context. This would be a process of getting to know the enemy and its product, the first step towards designing a new product that can be expected to put bums on seats for a long time to come. It would not be a duplication of existing work but a shot in the arm for an area of research and literature that is under-populated and that could be much enhanced by some targeted encouragement. That the enemy is so poorly known at present would seem to be sufficient justification for the investment and it would be doing a service for philosophers everywhere.

Given the promises that it would allow the department to make to prospective students it can be expected that demand will be high if the 'nondual' philosophy

of the mystical traditions were to be offered as an area of undergraduate study, but prior to the research it should not be assumed that it is perfect and cannot be improved. Perhaps it will be found that it cannot deliver on its marketing claims. Until this is determined we run the risk of introducing a new product that is immediately made redundant by an even better one. It would be important, therefore, that throughout any product design process the mission statement for the company remains the same as ever. The pursuit of a rational intellectual understanding of the universe, consciousness, time, origins, knowledge, God, ethics and so forth that can confidently and effectively be communicated to students will not be over until there is a professional consensus that it is. Perhaps the answers and explanations given in the Upanishadic tradition can be shown to be incorrect and the company's research process eventually destroys the credibility of its competitor. In marketing terms this would be an excellent outcome and well worth the time and effort, although not as profitable as having a more attractive product to sell than the current one.

A necessary first step would be to reach a corporate consensus on what this other philosophy actually is, what it claims, how it explains things, presented in an accessible language appropriate for use within the Academy. This will require the creation of an officially approved and trustworthy body of literature and its dissemination internally. A philosophical view can be taught without making a commitment to its truth or falsity but if front-line staff are going to be able to tell customers that they are offering them a great new product then they will have to know that it is one and must be able to explain what makes it so. If they have to tell customers that they do not know whether this philosophy would work as a description of the world, even in principle, or are not even quite sure what it is, then clearly the course is not worth taking.

Curriculum changes need not be considered at this time. If they happen they should be self-motivating, evolutionary, something individual departments choose to do if given the opportunity. The immediate corporate-wide issue would be the lack of any sort of consensus as to what the competitor is actually selling, what the perennial philosophy actually is, how to interpret its ambiguous and self-contradictory language, how it solves metaphysical problems and so forth. Within the Academy at this time there is no agreement on how to interpret or translate the 'nondual' or neutral philosophy of the 'enlightened' mystics, prophets, sages and countless less exalted practitioners who endorse it and therefore little recognition of an identifiable doctrine that is open to analysis and comparable with its alternatives. To many members it must appear that this other philosophical tradition is a myriad of different voices and nothing at all like a choir. This uncertainty about the competitor's product

would have to be cleared up before it can be offered as a new attraction. The Academy has spent many years trying to undermine the credibility of its competitor and internally seems to have been successful, for here this philosophical scheme is rarely studied and much misunderstood. If the Academy is to now endorse this product as at least worthy of serious study, as a complement or extension to its traditional product, then for the sake of its own credibility it will have to be able to show that there are very good reasons for this change of tune.

Such an approach might seem to prioritise sales over philosophical progress but the two goals would be mutually self-supporting. Just as long as the company retains a marketing focus it will be an honest search for the best possible product to offer to its customers and thus be an honest search for Wisdom, Knowledge and Truth. It cannot be predicted how the competing product can be improved and developed or whether it needs to be, but if it turns out that it has a terminal flaw then nothing has been lost and much gained. The Academy will then be able to offer courses explaining what is wrong with the Perennial Philosophy. Such a course ought to be popular and is surely long overdue. If no such flaw is discovered then it would not be a business decision to teach it but a professional duty.

Recommendations: The recommendation of this report is the establishment of a grant-awarding body supporting work that improves understanding of the philosophy of the Upanishads within the profession with the long-term goal of creating an approved canon of explanatory literature that can be trusted by undergraduate students and their teachers to be well-informed and safe to include on their reading-lists, one that is comprehensive and deals with all the necessary philosophical issues whilst also making the appropriate external connections to scientific consciousness studies, physics, evolutionary biology, psychology and so forth and is informed by them, and, crucially, that is designed for students who may choose not to do any experimental work.

This will not be a reproduction of the existing literature, which for the most part is targeted at practitioners and already more extensive than it needs to be, but a reliable and clear translation and interpretation of the existing literature that does not depend on non-ordinary experience (or mind altering substances!) for comprehension at the required level. Much authoritative and useful literature already exists but identifying it requires expertise and there are still significant gaps. This rigorous corporate approach to the creation of teaching material would eventually make possible standardisation across courses and a credible and well-defined teaching product that meets customer needs and ought to be

easy to sell. If the marketing claims of its competitor prove to be genuine, or at worst cannot be falsified, such that its product can be honestly promoted and sold, then this new product will make possible a discipline that cannot be criticised by physicists, university administrators, students or anyone else for its irrelevance, ineffectiveness or unprofitability.
